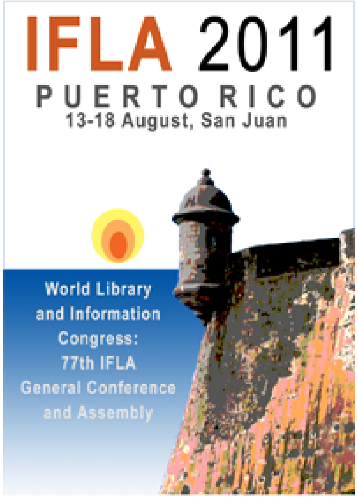



# Value of the practicum in library and information science education in Peru

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## Abstract:

*Library and Information Science programs in Peru are at a crossroad, and need to balance the objectives of a proper practicum as part of the curriculum with the need of the students for paid work. Using interviews with recently graduated professionals from both LIS programs in Lima, who have faced the problems of work/practicum situation, this paper analyzes the situation and tries to propose guidelines that should help the design a new practicum for the Catholic University. The purpose of our recommendations is to preserve the nature of the original objectives of the practicum, and at the same time help to shape the labor market so that students who need to be employed while studying, will find options that give them the opportunity to earn the required academic credits for graduation.*

## Introduction

A great number of professional programs at university level include in their curriculum, as a requirement for graduation, a period of work in an external organization related to the students chosen career. In Peru the two University level programs which offer degrees in Library and Information Science are no exception: both the Universidad Nacional Mayor de

San Marcos (UNMSM), a public university, and the Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru (PUCP), a private university, have mandatory periods of *Prácticas* at the end of their study period.

We conducted a survey for an earlier paper among students and alumni of the PUCP program ( (Jara de Súmar & Talavera Ibarra, 2009). The survey included a question related to the relative importance both groups assigned to the practicum compared with other mandatory courses. Of the 41 alumni who answered this question, 24 rated the practicum as very important or extremely important and 12 as fairly important. In the case of students, only 13 of them answered this item and 9 of them chose one of the top three categories. It seemed to us at that time, that the value of practicum was firmly established.

Two years later, we find that some PUCP students want to see the number of practicum hours reduced, and obtain credit for library work done under conditions other than those determined in the university's practicum regulations. A similar demand is being presented by students at the UNMSM. This demand is a reflection of the reality lived in Peru by LIS students of both universities. Students need to work in order to be able to pay their way through their university studies. And the job market in libraries and documentation centers offers them plenty of opportunities, yet not the ideal conditions for a proper practicum.

Given the importance that the PUCP program assigns to the practicum, and the need to increase the visibility of librarians in the labor market, Faculty members of the LIS program have started already an in-depth study of the information organizations where students are finding their practicum opportunities and the types of activities they are performing there, to determine if the instruction that students are receiving at PUCP corresponds with the skills and knowledge that the Peruvian labor market demands (De la Vega & Arakaki, 2011).

What we are trying to look at in this paper is how to reconcile the real life situation of the students, both at PUCP and UNMSM, with the need to demand that their work in libraries and information centers should meet minimum requirements to qualify as practicum.

## Literature review

A quick look at the literature shows that *practicum* is the most used term in the literature to refer to acquiring practical experience while studying, in order to be prepared for the job market. We also find other terms: *internship*, *field experience*, *placement, residency program, on-the-job training*. We have similar diversity in Spanish as reported by De la Vega and Arakaki (2011, p. 4). In Peru we use the term *prácticas preprofesionales* in the curriculum of both universities. In this paper we will use the term *practicum* for the Peruvian *prácticas preprofesionales*.

Some of the publications reviewed are simple reports on how the practicum or internship is managed in a specific library, and could be useful for us to review the way our practicum is structured and to obtain ideas of activities that we can add. One such cases is *Designing a Successful Library School Field Experience* (Kelsey & Ramaswamy, 2005) which offers paradigms that can be used as models, for both the supervisors and students participating in field experiences. The *Guidelines for student field experience* (Louisiana State University. School of Library and Information Science, 2004) which served as a framework for this study, are an excellent example of what needs to be considered when establishing regulations for a practicum in a library school. They cover the role and responsibilities of the three participants in a field experience – student, advisor and supervisor –, highlight the importance of presenting a final report, and include good examples of evaluation form, reflective journaling and student projects.

*Humble Empowerment* (Oberg & Samek, 1999) and *Library Practicum 101* (Claggett, et al., 2002) incorporate comments of the students from University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies and Dominican University Graduate School of Library and Information Science, respectively. From the first paper we retain the activities of keeping a reflective journal and having an exit interview (Oberg & Samek, p. 20). In the second paper, from the reflections of the employers, we like the statement: "A practicum student is not cheap labor… Practicum students are on the cusp of a professional career, and need to know how professional life looks and feels".(Claggett, et al., 2002, p. 37) . The authors also provide a useful chart with the Top Ten Benefits derived from the practicum for the employer, the student and the Graduate School (p. 40). Another paper, *Five steps to an effective internship program,* outlines an interesting model that can be applied to change a practicum program when it is not adequate anymore (Quarton, 2002).

There are other papers that focus on particular activities. We looked at two papers by the same authors, which stress the importance of the practicum for cataloguing work. The first paper, *A Survey of Cataloger Perspectives on Practicum Experiences* (Damasco & McGurr, 2008). proposes to answer three research questions. The first one, "What are the perceived benefits and/or drawbacks of a practicum?" (p. 46) seems to address the same concerns that we have. The authors report that some of the responses about what the students disliked implied that the practicum is too demanding. And the response "Only the schedule—I was working full time and going to school, so fitting in the hours [of practicum] was difficult" could have been said by most of the Peruvian LIS students. In their second paper, *Improving the Practicum or Internship Experience in Cataloging,* a follow-up of the paper previously commented, McGurr and Damasco seek "to determine best practices for cataloging practicums and internships based upon actual experiences and recommendations"(2010, p. 2) . Two surveys, with 11 questions each, were administered, one to students and one to supervisors of the practicum and useful recommendations for each of the groups are offered. Interestingly, McGurr and Damasco found this time also a similar situation to the one we have in Peru: "many academic advisors are not in frequent or meaningful contact with the practicum student" (2010, p. 15). The authors stress the importance of having a "solid three-way communication system among student, advisor and site supervisor" and suggest virtual meetings as a possible solution when lack of time is an issue.

Another very important study is presented in Chapter 11 of the European Community document on LIS curriculum (Espelt, Južnič, & van der Molen, 2005), also known as *Eurocompetencies*. The chapter analyzes the various position currently discussed with regard to practice-based training as part of the curriculum. The authors chose the term Placement for the title of their chapter, and indicate that in their text "the terms internship, work placement and practical training will all refer to a out-of-the-classroom experience" (Espelt, et al., 2005, p. 199), and stress the fact that these activities prepare the students for the professional life and have always been a very important part of the curriculum. Although there is currently some questioning to the value of practical experience within the curriculum, for these authors, in LIS programs "the practical component remains strong as in medicine, pedagogical professions and communication programmes". And due to this importance, they emphasize that "placement should be structured and supervised by a member of the teaching staff and a practitioner, should take place in approved institutions, should involve clearly defined tasks and goals, and also should include feedback and evaluation" (Espelt, et al., 2005, p. 200). These are extremely important issues that we will consider in our recommendations.

Another important point in this document is the fact that internships provide very good opportunities to develop personal and interpersonal competencies, something required as outcomes of professional education from the Bologna perspective. There is a very good analysis of the objectives for the student, the host institution and the educational institution that participate in a placement and the benefits of using this methodological approach in LIS education.

The last document we want to mention is a paper which not only describes the implementation of the practicum in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, but also relates its implementation to the Spanish legislation regarding practicum (Fernández Bajón, 1998).

The Spanish legislation which requires that the *Prácticas Profesionales* be part of the curriculum has as the main objective to approach the trainees to their globalized and complex future professional reality, as it is considered that educational systems take time to incorporate changes to the curriculum, whereas enterprises need to take changes into consideration as soon as possible, if they want to remain competitive in the market.

Regulations mandated by Spanish Royal decrees of 1981 are very precise:

- Universities and enterprises can sign specific cooperation agreements.
- Students need to be registered in the last two years of their careers and have taken at least 50% of the credits required for graduation.
- Attendance to classes is a priority and therefore activities in the external organization cannot take more than 50% of the total time dedicated to the academic term.
- Although the student's activities are regulated by the enterprise, if the student is hired after the practicum finishes, the time worked cannot be considered for seniority (Fernández Bajón, 1998).

Following these guidelines, the Escuela Universitaria de Biblioteconomía y Documentación de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid added a 10-credit practicum to the curriculum in 1983. Fernández Bajón indicates that part of the requirements for an enterprise to qualify as a training center is to have a properly established section where documentation and information are managed under the direction of a specialized person and that a *tutor* be assigned to the student (pp. 139-140). And she concludes that, in reviewing their experience, it is possible to say that the practicum is not only necessary but essential.

## Practicum in Peruvian LIS schools

In Peru, practicum at various levels is regulated by *LEY N º 28518. Ley sobre modalidades formativas laborales* (Peru. Congreso de la Republica, 2005). According to article 2 of this law, *prácticas preprofesionales*, which would correspond to those in the LIS curriculum, are classified as training type b.1: learning mainly in the teaching center. This implies that university instruction should take priority.

Article 12 defines practicum as the training type that allows students in training to apply their knowledge, abilities and skills to a real work situation. It further establishes that a contract (*Convenio de Aprendizaje*) must be signed between an enterprise (training center), a trainee (student about to graduate) and a teaching center (University or Higher Education Center). But this law doesn't take into consideration the minimum conditions in terms of space and materials required to perform the work that must exist for the practicum to be counted as

credits towards graduation according to internal university regulations, nor does it mention the need for the presence of a supervisor in the training center and a practicum coordinator in the teaching center.

The length of the practicum is not regulated, and the suggestion is that it will be determined by the level of qualification required by the professional activity. The *Convenio* refers to the type of work to be performed, benefits for the student, including minimum wage, health insurance and compensations and vacations when the practicum takes more than 12 months.

Obligations of the enterprise, the trainee and the teaching center are spelled out in articles 41, 42 and 43, but with no specifics, as is the case in Spain. Most of these obligations are generic principles and apply to most labor situations, and is causing distortion in the labor market. Instead of hiring regular workers, students are hired by enterprises at whatever stage in their studies, with a practicum contract, which makes them say they already fulfilled the requirement in the curriculum. As the obligations of the teaching center are also very generic, universities are free to impose whatever requirements they see fit. Thus, each of the LIS programs in Peru has a required Practicum period and its own *Reglamento de prácticas preprofesionales*, which doesn't necessarily correspond with the above mentioned law, but rather the requirements for graduation of their respective Universities, as they were prepared and enforced before the law was approved.

The last article we want to mention is No. 44, which restricts student trainees work time to no more than 6 hour a day or 30 hours a week.

Here are some highlights of the practicum regulations in both universities.

**Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú**:

LIS practicum in the PUCP takes place after the 9th semester, when the student has approved all course up to the 8th semester. Practicum can take place in any type of information service or unit (archives, libraries, museums, database providers, public services) and the student must work under the supervision of a professional in the field, preferably a librarian. Practicum consists of 200 hours, worked in two different training centers. These centers are chosen by the student and the practicum coordinator, according to the student's interests and the availability in the chosen center. Approximately 3-4 students register in the practicum each semester.

At the end of the practicum, the student submits a detailed report of the work performed. Then the supervisor of the training center and the coordinator from the university evaluate the performance of the student using a special form prepared for this purpose. It is the coordinator then who assigns the final grade.

In their recent article, De la Vega and Arakaki (2011) mention certain characteristics regarding choosing the training centers, such as the lack of interest of the PUCP students to practice in the Biblioteca Nacional del Perú, and their preference for libraries in private universities. Regarding the tasks performed during the practicum, about one-third reported working in traditional processing tasks (cataloging, classification, indexing, and entering documents in automated systems). Also about one-third of the tasks correspond to public services: preparing bibliographies and/or newsletters and bulletins and searching databases. The authors also mention other tasks such as user training, management, creating/ updating web sites, and others.

**Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos**

Information about the situation in UNMSM was obtained during an extended interview we had last April with the former practicum coordinator, Prof. Isabel Miranda.

She told us that currently, LIS students from UNMSM have their practicum during the 10th semester of studies, The practicum consists of 306 hours and should be supervised by a professional. In almost all cases, students are given some credit when they have paid work in a library, even though no practicum contract has been signed. Students should have completed all the required courses in the curriculum, but they are usually allowed to register in some courses concurrently with the practicum. And, to perform the control of the practicum activities, several members of the teaching staff have now been assigned to supervise the 25-30 students that have a practicum every semester, as this was an impossible task for the former practicum coordinator

The reported situation differs from what is indicated in the current *Reglamento* and curriculum, approved in 2004, which are still officially in force. According to those documents students should have *practicum A* (136 hours) to be performed in one of the UNMSM's libraries and *practicum B* with 306 hours, to be done elsewhere. *Practicum A* has now been abolished and only *Practicum B* remains. Students are now asking that the practicum be reduced by 100 hours. The training center is usually assigned by the practicum coordinator, based on preferences requested or the availability of the center, but many of the practicum experiences take place in the UNMSM's libraries. Prof. Miranda indicated that the principal tasks performed during the practicum relate to desk duty and loans. We need to remember that most Peruvian libraries have closed-access stacks. She also indicated that for many students this is an opportunity to obtain a job at the end of their practicum.

Once the practicum is finished, students must submit a detailed report of the work done and the practicum supervisor together with LIS coordinator evaluate the student performance. Again, it is the coordinator who assigns the grade to the student.

What follows is a small comparative table that shows more similarities than differences.

| **Characteristics** | **PUCP** | **UNMSM** |
|---|---|---|
| Required course | Yes | Yes |
| Academic term | 9º-10º | 10º |
| Graded | Yes | Yes |
| Total number of hours | 200* | 306 |
| Average Number of students per term | 3-4 | 25-30 |
| Supervised by Librarian | Yes** | Yes |
| Report required | Yes | Yes |
| Opportunity to select practicum center | Yes | Sometimes |
| Traditional library activities (cataloging, classification, circulation, borrowing desk, etc.) | Partially | Yes frequently |
| Other activities (indexing, database searching, electronic newsletters, digitalization, etc.) | Yes | Rarely |
| Opportunity to suggest improvements | Yes | Rarely |
| Supervision/coordination from teaching center | Yes | Yes*** |

* in 2 training centers

** May be an Archivist or another Information Science professional when they are training in that kind of organization

*** Due to number of students enrolled in practicum, visits are not currently executed

As indicated in the introduction, students in both universities have difficulty in finding time for the practicum as they are already working, and would like to see their stable jobs in libraries be counted towards their practicum hours.

## Summary of the interviews to former practicum participants

To select our sample we contacted by mail some former students, requesting their cooperation by accepting to be interviewed and also suggesting names of other friends/colleagues who could cooperate. Once the contact was established, a phone interview was scheduled, sometimes followed up by an e-mail. All participants were asked the same questions.

- Thirty former students from both universities, who had done their practicum between 2005-2010 (we interviewed one from 2011) were contacted, and 15 of them accepted to be interviewed: five from PUCP and ten from UNMSM, a balanced sample considering the number of students in both programs.

- Regarding gender, the five PUCP participants were female and there were 7 female and 3 male participants from UNMSM. This may mean that women were more willing to answer or simply reflect the fact that the male ratio of the schools is approximately 3:1.
- Most of our respondents (9) did their practicum in 2006 and 2007, and one did it in 2011.

Questions asked during the interview and their answers can be grouped in the six following categories:

1. Experience previous to the practicum

All the respondents had worked or were working in libraries when they started their practicum, except for one former PUCP student. This result confirms the findings of C. Villanueva (2009) that the majority of recent graduates applying for a job had already been working for 2-3 years. It seems to us that this situation reflects that both the training centers and the students take advantage of the conditions determined by law 28518, which also regulates practicum for recent graduates, to create a job opportunity and perform professional work, usually with minimum pay. These newly graduates benefit from having a job that allows them to continue studying and building their resume, but enterprises get used to hiring "cheap labor" undermining the labor market for LIS professionals. Our 15 interviewees had worked in 1 to 5 different centers, with a total work experience going from 3 months to 2.5 years, staying in each job an average of 6 months.

UNMSM students confirmed that in most cases their work received partial or full credit for the practicum. In the case of the two participants who received full credit, they were asked to do some work on time outside their regular working hours and to develop a small project that could count towards the practicum. PUCP doesn't include this option in the practicum guidelines.

As for the place of work, and probably due to the characteristics of their own university, there was a clear tendency for PUCP students to work in private entities and for UNMSM students to go to public institutions. Only one of the five PUCP students worked in a public institution whereas 7 from UNMSM had at least once worked in one of them, including 4 who worked in their own university and 2 in governmental financial institutions.

The same tendency showed up in the practicum for credit, as PUCP was the training center for 2 of its students, in a library on campus and a research library outside campus. In the case of UNMSM, practicum for credit took place in the main library, faculty libraries and the archive.

2. Total number of Practicum hours

The second group of questions relates to total practicum hours, and the weekly average. As has already been said, PUCP practicum guidelines mandate 200 hours in two different organizations. This held true with all the interviewees. In the case of UNMSM, we found that practicum hours varied from 0, in the cases when work was accepted as practicum, to 240 hours in some cases, with an average of 200 effective hours, far from the 306 mentioned in the regulations. Number of hours varied depending on how many work hours were validated as practicum. It is important to emphasize that as part of the general comments at the end of the interview, these students asked repeatedly that work be counted instead of practicum. In

one case, a student mentioned she was forced to resigned from his work, to have time for the practicum, which she found unacceptable..

Most of the student indicated that practicum took 4 to 5 hours per day, though in one case the student had to ask for vacations, and worked 9-10 hours a day during that period to complete the practicum. In many cases the solution was to find a university library offering evening and weekend service, which allowed them to meet the required hours during the term .

Former students from both universities indicated that they enrolled in a few courses during their practicum, although less than the full load. Two of the PUCP group took advantage of the academic vacation period to be able to concentrate in the practicum without a course load.

3. Main tasks performed

We found here a great variety of answers. A common situation to both groups is that they had to perform traditional tasks, such as processing materials and lending. It shows that many of the training centers were looking for solutions to their lack of staff and accepted a practicum to fill the circulation and information desks, as was acknowledged by Prof Miranda during our interview. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees mentioned performing rewarding activities, which allowed them to learn more and practice what they had learned: indexing, bibliographic searches for users, preparing alerts (current awareness bulletins), preparing inventories, organizing archives, preparing journals analytics, applying metadata, etc., and also some less common, such as working in restoration and digitization of document, and preparing electronic bulletins.

Most of the participants had the opportunity to chose their training center from options offered by the practicum coordinator, except for two, who had to accept an imposed organization. Even though they thought that previous experience should count when selecting a training center, in the end most of them based their choice in their time availability and the hours of opening of the training center (evenings and weekends).

Also, most of the participants had the opportunity to negotiate with their supervisor the increase/decrease of time spent in particular tasks, except for two people who couldn't do it and one who didn't answer. This is a good point in favor of those training centers. And on the topic of tasks, we could determine that the training centers assign the tasks, based on a previously agreed chronogram or as dictated by the day-to-day needs. This is something that the universities must revisit, as they should agree on the tasks to be performed, based on the individual's circumstances and knowledge, how the supervision should be done and what are the requirements necessary to qualify as a training center for a LIS practicum.

4. Payment and other benefits

When consulted about payment and other benefits, 9 of them, more than half of the participants, indicated that they received the legal minimum wages. Of these nine, seven were former UNMSM students and it makes us believe that for them work counted as practicum or that they were on a practicum contract under law 25828. Two participants indicated that a formal contract under the law was required to be accepted to do their practicum. There was a consensus that practicum should be paid, particularly when the student is forced to stop working in their regular job. This is another aspect that LIS programs should negotiate with the training centers, always within what is dictated by law.

In reference to other benefits, all participants received a certificate of participation indicating the number of hours worked, and only in three cases they received additionally a letter of recommendation. Those practicing under law 28518 were given also medical insurance and 15 days off work when they worked for more than one calendar year. Interestingly, three persons indicated that they received a job offer as a result of their work performance during practicum., but only one of them accepted the offer.

Participants were also asked if during their practicum they had opportunities to contact the regular staff of the training center and to coordinate activities with them and their supervisor. It seems that all the training centers did a good job in integrating the practicing student with the staff, sometimes they were even included in special training and courses within the organization.

Except for one, all the participants were supervised by a professional librarian during their practicum. The exception had the archive administrator as supervisor.

5. Practicum report

A fifth aspect worth mentioning, is the requirement that the student submits a detailed report at the end of the practicum. In most cases it is the university which demands the report, once the practicum is completed, or before the semester is over, to be able to give a grade to the student. Both universities also indicated that they have a special evaluation form that must be completed besides the report.

Even though most practicum participants, except for three, were authorized to submit recommendations or suggest improvements to the training center, these recommendations were not done in any document for the training center, and most likely they were never informed. Maybe a mid-term report to the training center could suggests pertinent corrections or additions to the activities which will allow a ore satisfactory completion of the practicum.

6. General suggestions and/or comments

To wrap-up the interview, participants were asked if they had additional comments or suggestions. As already indicated, most of the students requested that their job be considered equivalent to a practicum. They also suggested that practicum should be tailored to their abilities, or maybe there should be a progression that would allow them to start with the basics and move gradually to more complex aspects. One of the PUCP students suggested that of the two centers where the practicum must take place, one should be a library and the other one an archive, museum, documentation center, or other information unit. A final comment, particularly from the PUCP alumni was in favor of an adequately paid practicum.

## Recommendations

Our literature review did not find any indication that there are other instances where students request that the practicum be substituted by regular work situation. The Peruvian situation seems to be unique, yet it is a worrisome situation and we would like to find a solution. It is clear that regular, unstructured work situation cannot provide the benefits of a well conceived practicum. So, how to make sure that students recognize the differences between the two situations and accept that , in spite of their “librarianship experience” they need to invest 200

hours in a practicum situation? The following recommendations apply mainly to the PUCP, but could also be of use for the UNMSM.

- The lack of time factor is very important. Therefore practicum deadlines need to be accommodated, to help student meet them. There is a need of flexible time limits, such as allowing practicum to be done during the university vacations, or enlisting practice centers where students can do the practicum on evenings and weekends. If practicum is to be done in two different organizations, it seems reasonable that the current 200 hours be maintained.
- Develop very detailed guidelines about the conditions, requirements, etc. of the practicum, which shows how different it is from regular work situations. The Louisiana State University. School of Library and Information Science guidelines could be used as an example to follow. Guidelines need to establish percentages to be spend in the various services, and performing different tasks. They should take into consideration that practicum is an opportunity to be exposed to innovative services and new technologies, to be prepared for the future and not simple traditional librarianship work.
- The universities should be proactive in recruiting practice centers for their students, and keep a detailed directory of the centers and their main features, as well as a record of comments from previous student trainees who did their practicum there. The directory should include all types of information and documentation centers which could potentially hire graduates from their LIS programs. A sort of "seal of approval" could be granted to the best centers. Also, there could be some sort of event where the university recognizes the contribution of these centers to the students global learning experience.
- A better follow-up system should be implemented. There should be a formal mid-term evaluation and the responsible for the practicum should make themselves available to the students as much as possible.
- Students must be introduced to the practice of keeping a log and a journal. Exploring the possibility of shared journaling could be explored.
- A percentage of the practicum time, it could be 30% , should be dedicated to working on a particular project. The university should keep an updated list of interesting projects. And to provide incentives students, an open poster session, or similar, should be held at the end of the year, or to happen concurrently with an important event organized by the LIS program, to showcase the work done on those projects.
- Students should be urged, from early on their career, to visit other libraries or service units which do work related to their class work.
- Practicum final reports must not only be deposited with the university, but a copy must be sent to the training center, as part of a necessary feedback.
- Clear separation between the practicum as a requirement of the university, to be marked for a grade, and the practicum as defined by law 28518 which doesn't meet all the requirements established in the PUCP curriculum.

We want to thank particularly Professors de la Vega and Arakaki for making available to us their unpublished paper, professor Miranda for the valuable time spent talking with us, the students who helped us with recruiting volunteers and all those who answered our questions, and the responsible of practice centers who shared with us their experiences with our practicum students.

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